

**Book Review**

# Afghanistan from Darius to Amanullah

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## Introduction.

Books have been very much part of human civilisation from the earliest period, however it is around 400 BC that we find this art in a more mature and professional manner. The focus of early books was more on history thus we come across Thucydides and Herodotus writing about the history of world and about wars in Greek civilisation. Afghanistan as a country did not exist then yet it was subject of interest even at that era. Alexander the Great marched through it and Arrian recorded that in his *Anabasis*. The history of subcontinent is incomplete without the mentioning and great influence of Afghanistan, which as a country took birth in 1740s. The British came to India in 1600 and by 1800 were in control of its economy, in 1840 the first Anglo-Afghan War took place followed by another in 1878 and then again in 1918. In between the tussle between Great Britain and Russia for the political, economical and military rivalry in Central Asia, Afghanistan, India gave birth to Great Game; this game had its culmination in 1989 when USSR was broken and war in Afghanistan was the main cause. Afghanistan from that point onward descended into chaos, anarchy, civil war and militancy. In 2001, USA invaded Afghanistan and now after twenty years it is withdrawing from it thus opening a new Pandora box regarding the future of Afghanistan.

**Book,** *Afghanistan from Darius to Amanullah* was first published in 1929, written by Lieutenant General (retired) Frederick George Macmunn and published in London by Bells and Sons, it was being sold for 29 shillings. The present copy under review was published by Sang-e-Meel Publishers Lahore in 1999. It is hard bound, 329 pages with appendix and a colourful map which is folded and tucked in the back cover. Book has no less than twenty black and white illustrations of pictures about Afghanistan. The paper quality is very good and font size is also readable although for senior readers the glasses are mandatory. The price of book is Rupees 1500 which is very reasonable and it can be ordered through mail.

**Author.** It is often stated that before you read a book, read about the author, as only after knowing the author that one can either accept the narration or otherwise. The biography

and experience also predetermines the quality of work; if the author has a substantial knowledge and experience, then his propositions and ideas are more readily accepted. In this case the author Fredrick George Macmunn was born in 1869 in Chelsea (England) joined Military Academy Woolwich in 1869 and was commissioned in Regiment of Artillery. Through his illustrious, adventurous and interesting career he rose to the rank of a lieutenant general and was also the colonel commandant of regiment of Royal Artillery. He served in India as well, he was married to Annie ....and was blessed with a son and daughter. After retirement he was the warden of Saville Colleges. He died in 1952, he wrote over a 100 publications mostly on history and military history, apart from this particular book, his other famous publications are *Armies of India*, *Martial Races of India*

### **Layout of Book.**

The layout of the book is in chronological chapters and they are twenty in numbers, which can be broadly divided into two main themes, the first five chapters dealing with geography, early history of Afghanistan, racial and religious division, Afghans in India, their invasions and conquests. The second main theme starts from Chapter VI in which the first clash took place between British and Afghans and for the remaining chapters of the book the main focus is on the relationships, wars and politics between British India and Afghanistan. The last three chapters deal with king Amanullah, the development and finally the end of Durrani Dynasty. There are 23 illustrations and seven maps, all black and white; however at the end of the book is a folded coloured map of Afghanistan which is very useful.

Thus the main focus of the writer is on the Anglo- Afghan relationships.

### **The First Theme.**

As stated above the first theme of the book extending over first four chapters is the history, geography, culture, racial and religious divisions of the Afghanistan. The debate over the origin and logo of Afghanistan and the origin of the tribes is not resolved yet author has to a great effect. “*geographically, racially and politically, India and Afghanistan have been one*” (p-2). Author has done well in explaining the geography, not a easy thing and definitely the maps in the book does help. Afghanistan can be understand much better once the geography of the country is grasped by reader. The location of key town like Kabul- Kandahar-Herat and Balk. The Helmund River in south and Amu Darya in the north, the extend of Caucasus Mountain; all have a direct bearing on later and present day politics and history.

Naturally the earliest settlements sprung up astride rivers and water rich valleys, the emergence of tribes in Afghanistan although not much different from similar tribal composition in Africa, Arabia and in Europe, however in Afghanistan by virtue of geography the tribal composition is rather rooted in the land. The key question as why the word Afghan is use, author has a reason and answer. *This race claimed their desendency from Saul and his grandson Afghana,*

*a commander in chief of King Solomon, and an eighteenth descent from King of Israel* (p-19). Thus Afghanistan and Afghans claim their origin to Israel and Jews. In the same context author also highlights the rise of Islam, although this part is covered in a very brief manner. Racial division in Afghanistan is fundamental for any observer to understand, if he wants to grasp the full picture of the country. Afghan nation consist of three main branches or tribes Ghilzi, Durrani and Pathan (p-20). Author then gives brief background of each ethnic race the language history. Apart from these three races author also highlights the Afghan Turk, the Kafirs and Hazaras ; latter in the book all these races have a direct bearing on the events and their impact.

The fourth and fifth chapters of the book deals with the invasion and subsequent rule of Afghans over India. Author has given brief but coherent details of this phenomenon, the Rohilkand Area or territory in northern India was inhabited by the Afghans and as such known as Rohilkand. The invasion of Nadir Shah and especially that of Ahmed Shah Abdalli in 1748 and 60s is a great milestone in this history. Author as a matter of fact has given the background starting from Mahmud of Ghazni, the Khiljis , Lodhis and other Afghans in the helm of power. Ahmed Shah Durrani crossed Indus no less than nine times (p-55) in his rule and this speaks itself of the dominant role and rule of Afghans over India. *The very name of Afghan was a horror to the inhabitants of India...Punjabi women would quiet their children with the threat of the coming of the Afghans* (p-77)).

## **Second Theme**

The other or the second theme of the book is the interaction, rivalry and clashes between the British and the Afghans and in the rest of the book this theme is the most dominating. The narration highlights first the inner clashes and rivalry among the ruling elite and tribes of Afghanistan , the coming into power of Fateh Muhammad and Dost Muhammad or fall of Durrani and rise to power of Barrakzai tribe. This aspect and era of history is important for Pakistani readers as it highlights the extent and policy of Afghanistan over India, Multan, Lahore, Peshawar and Kashmir were all provinces of Kabul.

First Afghan War is covered in Chapter VIII and next six chapter all are concentrating on the Afghan Wars and then a chapter on Amir Abdur Rehman. The Afghan Wars causes and their subsequent unfolding are covered by the author. It must be highlighted that these are not the first time that these acts are being put into paper , thus it becomes more as a style and mindset of the author as how he explains and narrate the entire episodes of wars and in this aspect the author has done good to give the essential account. It must also be kept in mind that this book was printed in 1929 and its obvious readers were British thus the details and comments are in line with the general policy at of the government at that time. Therefore there is no criticism of any one in the government other than that of the opponents (Afghans) . The style of writing is a lesson for modern writers as author has always been very careful in his comments and even when he is criticism Afghans he still maintains an aura of decency and authenticity.

The account and narration of two Anglo-Afghan wars in continuity are a great asset of this book, very few books on history have given such a running account of the two campaigns. From reader point of view this gives lot of clarity and removes many misgivings and fog of war, thus these accounts are worth appreciating and this adds more colour and usefulness to the book as a whole.

Chapter ( Chapter XIV) on Amir Abdur Rehman is fascinating, one reason is that at this precise moment, author highlights and narrates personal anecdotes which he collected while compiling the book. It is worth mentioning that in previous chapters there is nothing new other than the perceptions and viewpoint of the author but in this chapter as a reader one comes across new knowledge more specifically about Amir Abdur Rehman.

Abdur Rehman had a similar life pattern as that of other Afghan rulers and princes, he spent almost ten years in present day Central Asia then under Russian control . His coming back to Afghanistan from the north, collecting people, making treaties and finally coming into power at Kabul are all fascinating and also shows an in depth narration of the path and events that are generally followed and adopted in Afghanistan by rulers to reach the crown of Kabul. In case of Amir Abdur Rehman the fact that he wrote an autobiography further accentuates the accounts. Author has greatly defended Rehman's action and atrocities and he has give few accounts of that too ( p-210). The account about Abdur Rehman also throw light on the Russian- Anglo conflict in the region, the efforts and policies of subsequent British governments in London regarding the correct policy to be adopted like 'Forward Policy', 'Scientific Border' and 'Behind the Indus'.

Chapter XVI, 'The Stable Afghan Kingdom' reflects the authors own point of view as he saw the kingdom from a military point of view. He gives a detail account of the customs, laws, rituals, government functions and the policies of first Amir Abdur Rehman followed by Amir Habibullah ( son of Abdur Rehman). Author has a hidden appreciation of Amir Rehman and he quotes quite frequently from the Amir's autobiography regarding the events at that era.

Third Afghan War is covered in a separate chapter and naturally one is inclined to accept the version of the author as he was an eye witness to many such acts and events of that time. Why it started and how it came to an end are covered not in much details but within the purview of the book the event is given due space.

The last three chapters of the book deals with the King Amanullah, the development and progress in Afghanistan and the looking forward. At this point the author has now giving a modern outlook to the policies of the King Amanullah and how he has transitioned Afghanistan into a modern state. Railways are cited, highlighted and stated as the future key to the development in Afghanistan. Author has elaborated in detail with amp showing the proposed railways in Afghanistan and how it can improve connectivity in the region. Needless to add that even after passing of a century, railways are still not functional in that country and from policy makers to scholars all are in unison in accepting the importance of railways in Afghanistan.

**Conclusion.**

Every book when it is finished leaves an impact on readers mind, first of all very few books are read till the end because readers always feel that he knows what all is given in the book. However in case of this particular book, the style of narration is such that one feels that something new is coming in next pages. I personally find the last chapters of the book more enthralling for the reason that it is here that author is adding knowledge from his experience rather than quoting from old books.

While reading it must be kept in mind the era and environment of that particular time and period, therefor author's observation and comments on the policy matters, the conduct of Afghan Wars are all reflection of that particular colonial mindset. What makes this book worth reading and worth keeping is the style, knowledge and the narration which has made plausible for a scholar of university level to understand the events taking place now and almost centuries ago in the Afghanistan. This book is worth reading today also as the life pattern and events in Afghanistan by and large are still the same as depicted and narrated in the book.